

Thursday, October 19, 2000

FAMILY

In the Pumpkin Patch

Seasonal Southland celebrations are offering a variety of activities and glimpses of farm life.

By BRENDA REES, Special to The Times

Consider the pumpkin: the majestic squash that is synonymous with October, Halloween and all things autumn. The pumpkin is believed to have originated in North America; pumpkin seeds have been found in Mexico dating back to 5,500 BC. The hardy and versatile pumpkin is one of the few crops that are grown and enjoyed on six continents. (But don't try growing a pumpkin in Antarctica.)

Here in Southern California, pumpkins large and small are being celebrated this month at local farms, festivals and parades. A visit to an outdoorsy location is not only a chance to pick up a fresh (and cheap) pumpkin for Halloween decorations, but also an opportunity for families to experience a little bit of farm life up close and personal.

The annual Calabasas Pumpkin Festival--held this weekend at Paramount Ranch in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreational Area--is the place to find, among the 30 tons of pumpkins, a wide range of down-home family fun such as seed-spitting contests, mechanical bull riding, making your own crafts and pumpkin bowling.

Pumpkin food will be well represented at the festival: pies, bread, cookies and ice cream. Families are encouraged to wander the popular western town set and visit a Native American village, learn how to make salsa and get lost in a mini-corn maze.

Elsewhere in the Southland, family farms will be showing off their harvest spirit. For 26 years, Faulkner Farm in Santa Paula has held a monthlong pumpkin festival that spokeswoman Karen Schott calls "a noncommercial way to spend a day. We offer simple country fun."

"While we have a lot of families come out, we see many teens here too, probably because we have become a tradition for them," Schott says.

Part of that tradition for Faulkner Farm visitors may include taking a scenic hayride, watching quilting and other craft demonstrations, strolling through the giant sunflower forest or listening to the weekend musical entertainment.

To really get your hands in the country, plan a visit to Tierra Rejada Family Farm in Moorpark, where you can pick your own vegetables and fruits year-round. During the farm's fall festival, owners expect to sell ornamental gourds, heirloom tomatoes and about 200 tons of pumpkins.

"Every weekend in October we have country games, clowns, live music, a monster maze and 'haunted' hayrides under the walnut trees," says James Barker, co-owner of the ranch. "We are open to the public year-round but this time of year we see more families coming out to experience life on a family farm. There's no carnival rides here--it's the real thing."

Similarly, Lombardi Ranch in Saugus offers a wide assortment of fruits and vegetables besides pumpkins that fill the five-acre festival area through the end of the month. Kids of all ages swarm and crawl in and out of huge fiberglass jack-o'-lanterns, a full-size firetruck and a police paddy wagon.

"We like seeing kids use their imagination when they come out here," says Joann Lombardi, ranch owner.

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Whimsy is in full force at the two Johnson Brothers Pumpkin Patches in Huntington Beach and Irvine, where, out of a field of corn, a wiggling waving hand welcomes guests--the patches' hallmark for 11 years.

Tom Johnson, co-owner, is proud of his Land of the Giants, a special section that displays enormous pumpkins. "We also have the pumpkin graveyard that is pretty elaborate, where some of our blemished and bruised pumpkins are placed," he says. In addition, the patches feature barnyard animals, a children's playground and Halloween bouncing bags where kids of all ages can punch out their aggressions.

Open from now until Oct. 28, the Green Meadows Farm at Ernest Debs Park in Highland Park offers visitors a hands-on experience of a working farm, complete with 500 farm animals.

"We want people to come and touch as many animals as they can," owner Ted Keyes says. "Kids can milk a cow, feed the goats and sheep, ride a pony or hold a baby chick. We're not a zoo--all our animals are touchable. Adults get into the spirit of things just as much as the kids."

Visitors are led on a two-hour tour of the farm and, at the end, pick out a free pumpkin to take home with them. "We're more



Calabasas Chamber of Commerce

than just a petting zoo. Kids get a firsthand experience of what happens on a farm," Keyes explains.

For a spookier hands-on experience, kids can examine all sorts of bugs at the Creepy Crawly Fair sponsored by the Pumpkin Festival at Descanso Gardens, Oct. 28-29. Booths displaying bugs and bees are just part of planned activities that include daily parades through the gardens, spooky nature walks, puppetry and music.

"This season is a perfect way to introduce children to the wonders of nature," says spokeswoman Carol Stewart. "You just have to take them outside and do it."

BE THERE

The Calabasas Pumpkin Festival, Saturday-Sunday, 2813 Cornell Road (Kanan Road exit off the Ventura Freeway), Agoura, (818) 225-2227. Faulkner Farms, through Oct. 31, 14292 W. Telegraph Road, Santa Paula, (805) 525-2226. Tierra Rejada Family Farm, through Oct. 29, 3370 Moorpark Road, Moorpark, (805) 529-3690. Lombardi Ranch, through Nov. 23, 29527 Bouquet Canyon Road, Saugus, (661) 296-8697. Johnson Brothers Farms, through Oct. 31, 15744 Golden West St., Huntington Beach (adjacent to Golden West College), (714) 891-7456, and Irvine Center Drive and Jeffrey Road, Irvine (adjacent to Irvine Valley College), (949) 733-0650. Green Meadows Children's Farm, through Oct. 28, Ernest Debs Park, 4235 Monterey Road, Los Angeles, (323) 224-8504. Pumpkin Festival at Descanso Gardens, Oct. 28-29, 1418 Descanso Drive, La Canada-Flintridge, (818) 952-4401.

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